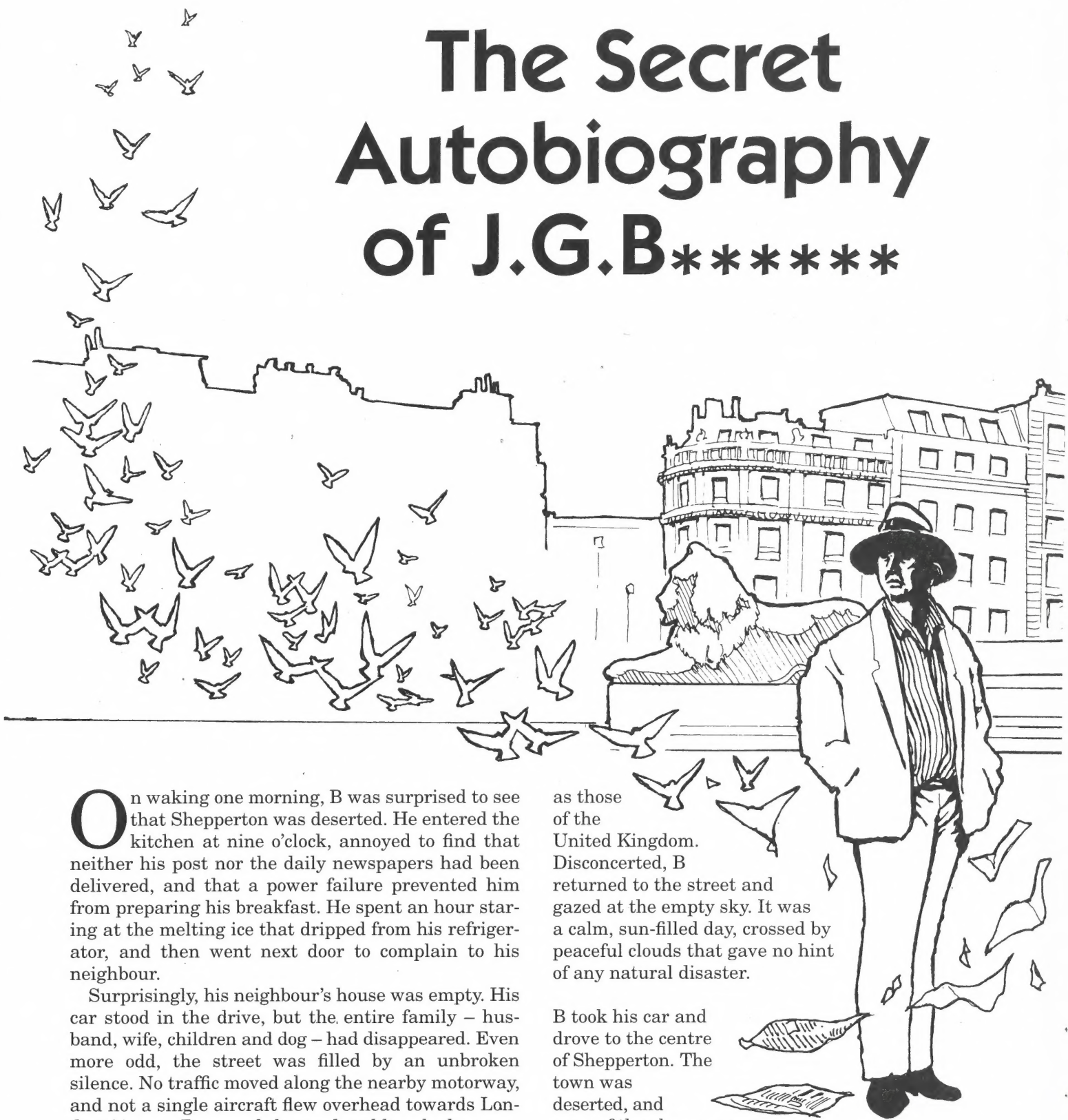


The Secret Autobiography of J.G.B*****



On waking one morning, B was surprised to see that Shepperton was deserted. He entered the kitchen at nine o'clock, annoyed to find that neither his post nor the daily newspapers had been delivered, and that a power failure prevented him from preparing his breakfast. He spent an hour staring at the melting ice that dripped from his refrigerator, and then went next door to complain to his neighbour.

Surprisingly, his neighbour's house was empty. His car stood in the drive, but the entire family – husband, wife, children and dog – had disappeared. Even more odd, the street was filled by an unbroken silence. No traffic moved along the nearby motorway, and not a single aircraft flew overhead towards London Airport. B crossed the road and knocked on several doors. Through the windows he could see the empty interiors. Nothing in this peaceful suburb was out of place, except for its missing tenants.

Thinking that perhaps some terrible calamity was imminent – a nuclear catastrophe, or a sudden epidemic after a research laboratory accident – and that by some unfortunate mishap he alone had not been warned, B returned home and switched on his transistor radio. The apparatus worked, but all the stations were silent, the continental transmitters as well

as those of the United Kingdom. Disconcerted, B returned to the street and gazed at the empty sky. It was a calm, sun-filled day, crossed by peaceful clouds that gave no hint of any natural disaster.

B took his car and drove to the centre of Shepperton. The town was deserted, and none of the shops was open. A train stood in the station, empty and without any of the passengers who regularly travelled to London. Leaving Shepperton, B crossed the Thames to the nearby town of Walton. There again he found the streets completely silent. He stopped in front of the house owned by his friend P, whose car was parked in her drive. Using the spare key that he carried, he unlocked the front door and entered the house. But even as he called her name he could see that there was no trace of the young woman. She had not slept

One great sf trilogy concludes, another begins.

With *Blue Mars* (HarperCollins, £16.99) Kim Stanley Robinson brings to an end an impressive feat of science-based world-building, a chronicle of over two hundred years of future history so immaculately realized that it has seemed, at times, to be the truth foretold. Of course they probably said much the same about *The Shape of Things To Come*, but Wells's speculations had more to do with his political inclinations and desires than with prescience. Robinson is not averse to utopian dreaming either, but his *Mars* trilogy grounds the utopian ideal in practical possibility and sets out a blueprint for achieving it, detailing the journey rather than the destination. This, combined with Robinson's depth of research in an awesome array of fields, his sinewy, allusive prose and his firm grasp of the flaws and foibles that add depth to character, works the miracle of making a dream appear not just worthy of pursuit but attainable.

For anyone who has read the preceding volumes in the trilogy, *Blue Mars* feels just like coming home. Michel the psychotherapist, Ann the geologist (as hard and as stratified with secrets as the rocks she studies), the scientifically brilliant but socially autistic Sax, Maya the irascible earth-mother, dark horse Nadia, the peripatetic and possibly mad Coyote ... meeting these characters again is like joining up with old friends after a long absence. The tie that binds them together as members of the fabled First Hundred who began the process of colonizing and terraforming the Red Planet also binds them to us. We have been with them ever since they landed on Mars and took their first tentative toddling steps out onto the low-g surface. We have observed their squabbles and shifting alliances, we have endured with them the struggle for independence from Earth in both *Red Mars* and *Green Mars*, and in *Blue Mars* we see them enjoying the fruits of the peace and prosperity they have laboured so long and hard to engineer. Impossibly advanced in years, their lives artificially extended, they are coming to grips with the fact that they have done as much as any human beings can ever hope to, and also coming to grips with a condition arising as a result of their prolonged senescence, namely that while their physical faculties remain unimpaired, their mental faculties are, alarmingly, starting to fail. They are living legends, responsible for founding a new civilization, one based on fairness, equality, justice, and care for the environment, one that is genuinely civilized, but what are they to do now when such a past is behind them, and

It Ain't Over 'Til the Fat Lady Gets Tossed Out of the Airlock

James Lovegrove

what is the use of owning such a past if their memory cells, unable to cope with three times as much information as they were designed to hold, are failing, and it is becoming harder and harder to remember anything?

The *Mars* of *Blue Mars*, with its elegantly designed townships and ship-towns, its huge expanses of unspoilt territory, the freedom for everyone to do pretty much as he or she pleases, a communal sense of working together for a greater good, and the opportunity for spectacularly adventurous leisure activities, is a virtual Eden, and therein lies the problem for its inhabitants. To the 20 billion denizens of a flooded, teeming, full-to-bursting Earth, the next-door neighbour planet is the Promised Land, the new America, and naturally every Terran wants to move there. Solving that problem and helping draft a new constitution for this New World occupies the surviving members of the First Hundred for most of the novel, giving them a focus in their declining years, a pin around which to fasten the crumbling fragments of lives made redundant by success and the rise of younger, brighter generations. Regrettably, the minutiae of political wrangling and constitution-drafting make for some patience-testing chapters, Robinson so caught up in his knowledge of systems of government and his (admittedly inspired) synthesis of history's more successful modes of democracy that he often appears to be overlooking one fundamental point, namely that the reader is possibly marginally less obsessed with the nitty-gritty of

the world-building process than he is and wants to get back to the characters and the story. Impressive these passages may be, but a pleasure to peruse? Perhaps.

But one can forgive Robinson such longueurs for the effusive, exotic brilliance that abounds elsewhere in *Blue Mars*. The chapters dealing with the return to Earth of Sax, Maya and Michel – and the first visit of Nirgal, a native-born Martian, to the cradle of humanity – are vibrant with both the nostalgia and the strangeness of the experience. After so long away, for the Martian colonists Earth has become the alien planet, the "Mars." The gravity is crushing, the colours painfully vivid, the air thick to breathe – all of which reminds Sax, Maya and Michel that the world they have helped create can never be another Earth and that therefore it must always be somewhere new, different and, they hope, better. Nirgal, meanwhile, seven feet tall, narrow-chested, bronze-skinned, is truly of another species, a human being who does not belong and cannot physiologically handle Earth – the paradox is reinforced when he contracts a potentially lethal pulmonary illness from an Earth virus and has to be hastily shuttled back to Mars. Going home has other drawbacks, as Michel discovers when a brief stay in his native Provence leaves him almost incurably homesick.

The question of home is one of the book's central themes – what constitutes home, whether a person defines his or her own sense of place or a sense of place defines the person – and the answer, Robinson suggests, is that home is not just where your memories tell you you belong but where the environment welcomes you and lets you be. It's another facet of the old nature/nurture debate. People are not simply the products of the commingling of their parents' genes but of where and how they were brought up. Thus when Sax attempts to restore the failing memories of the remaining members of the First Hundred, he isn't just trying to save them from disorientating mental blackouts and unwelcome peak experiences but, in effect, trying to recreate them anew, to remind them once again of who they are and what they have done and why they deserve to be proud of themselves and the society they have founded. If Sax can, with a few casual taps of a computer keyboard, bring about an ice age (as he does), or bring his friends, in effect, back to life, then science in Robinson's 23rd century has given men the powers of gods, but *Blue Mars* is telling us that divinity is worthless unless it is tempered with a sense of self and its close cousin, a sense of place.

BOOKS



REVIEWED